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THE ANCIENT ERA

PERIOD I.

THE APOSTOLIC AGE (1-100).

CHAPTER I.

THE STATE OF THE WORLD: THE GENTILE AND THE JEW.

The condition of the civilized nations at the birth of Christ was propitious for the introduction and spread of a new religion, in its nature adapted to all mankind. Under the sovereignty of Rome, beneath the shield of law and of a government that enforced order, they were combined into one vast political body. The world had experienced the benefit of two potent civilizing agencies, Greek culture and Roman sway. The old mythological religions, which sprung originally from a deifying of nature, had fallen into decay and lost their hold on the intelligent class. Nothing had arisen to fill the void thus created. The loss of faith, as might be expected, engendered the two extremes of superstition and infidelity, neither of them satisfying, and both repugnant to the best minds. Philosophy had done an important work in enlarging and educating the intellect, but it had proved itself in the main powerless to keep alive religious faith, to curb the passions, or to provide hope and consolation in distress. "Having no hope and without God in the world," an Apostle's description of the heathen generally, was eminently true at this period. Meantime the whole course of events which resulted in the upbuilding of imperial Rome had produced and diffused abroad in the civilized nations a profligacy which probably has had no parallel, before or since, in the annals of the race. The loosening of the bonds of morality, the prevalence of vice, not to dwell on the remorse and fears of conscience that haunted souls not hardened in evil, could not fail to awaken in many a sense of the need of a more effectual restraint

The times
propitious.

than heathen worship, or Greek letters and philosophy, or Roman civil law could furnish. There was a craving, more or less obscurely felt, for a new regenerating force that should enter with life-giving efficacy into the heart of ancient society. The age was ripe and ready for the incoming of such an epoch. "In the fulness of time God sent forth his Son."

When Christ was born, which was four years before the date assigned in our calendar for the beginning of the Christian era, the

The empire
under Augustus
B.C. 31-
A.D. 14.

Roman world was governed by Augustus Caesar. His triumph over the republican leaders by whom his grand-uncle, Julius Caesar, had been slain, and his subsequent naval victory, at Actium, over his colleague and rival, Mark Antony, had made him undisputed master of the empire. His authority in the capital and in the provinces was practically absolute, although it was exercised under the forms of the extinct republic which the earlier Caesar had subverted. The policy of Augustus was defensive and peaceful. It was after his reign, in the first century, that Britain, which had been repeatedly invaded, was at last, in 85, conquered as far as the friths of Scotland, and later still, in 106, that Dacia, on the north of the Danube, became a province. The Roman dominion extended from that river to the cataracts of the Nile and the desert of Africa on the south, and stretched eastward from the Atlantic to the Euphrates. There was no defined boundary between the regions of the East and of the West, whose differing characteristics had much to do afterwards in effecting the political separation between them, and, later still, in dividing the Greek from the Latin Church. The diffusion of political privileges, including the boon of Roman citizenship, was gradually raising the provinces to a common level, and converting Rome into the metropolis, instead of the mistress, of the empire. Yet to be a Roman citizen was still a coveted privilege among the subjects of the emperor, whether near or remote. It conferred important privileges. It was a safeguard against various indignities and dangers. Nominally, at least, it made the possessor of it a member of the ruling class in the state.

Whatever tended to break down the barriers of national and race antipathy, and to produce unity and a sense of unity among men,

Sense of unity
produced by
Rome.

paved the way for a just appreciation of the Christian religion when it should appear, and would serve to help on its progress. The subjection in common of so many nations to one government of itself acted strongly in this direction. Beyond the external advantages, such as the protection of life, the

preservation of order, and the facilitating of intercourse, which the sway of Rome secured, the natural effect of it was to evoke a feeling of unity. The system of Roman law, administered wherever there were Roman citizens, was an educating influence of a like tendency.

The mutual influence of the Greeks and Latins, and the united effect of the Greek and Latin languages and culture, not only enlarged and enriched the minds of men, but also served to form a groundwork of intellectual and moral sympathy.

Among all the peoples that have appeared on the stage of history the Greeks are the most eminent for literary and artistic genius. Their wonderful creations in literature, science, philosophy, and art were fast becoming the common property of the nations. It was the reasonable boast of Plato, that while other races, as the Phœnicians, had been devoted to money-making, the Greeks, in intellectual power and achievement, excelled them all. Greek letters were widely disseminated in the East by the conquests of Alexander. To him the populous and prosperous city of Alexandria in Egypt, which was planted in 332 B.C., owed its foundation. Alexandria became a flourishing seat of Greek learning, a centre where the streams of Hellenic and Oriental culture were mingled. A rival city, in rank the second city in the East, was Antioch in Syria, founded, in 300 B.C., by Seleucus Nicator. The fall of Greek liberty and the subjugation of Greece by the Romans gave an additional impetus to the spread of the Greek population in all quarters. In early times their settlements had been scattered along the coasts and on the islands of the Mediterranean. Greek at length grew to be the language of commerce, the vehicle of polite intercourse, and a common medium of communication through all the eastern portion of the empire. The Latin tongue, the language of Roman officials and of the Roman legions, was carried wherever Roman conquests and colonies went. West of the Adriatic, especially in Italy, Gaul, Spain, and North Africa, it prevailed as the Greek prevailed elsewhere.

Under the reign of Augustus an increased stimulus was given to travel and intercourse between different parts of the Roman world.

There were journeys of civil and military officers, and the marching of legions from one place to another. Piracy had been suppressed, and now that peace was established there was a vast increase of trade and commerce, in which the Jews everywhere took an active part. There was much travelling for health and for pleasure. Roman youth studied at Athens and visited the antiquities of Egypt and of the East. Provincials were eager to

see Rome. From curiosity, to get employment or largesses, to buy and to sell, to find or to furnish amusement, they flocked to the capital.

As all religions were national, when the independence of a nation broke down, a shock was necessarily given to religious faith.

Where were the gods that they did not shield and rescue their worshippers? The mingling of so many diverse systems of religion, with their motley varieties of ritual, tended to undermine the credence which they had attracted from their votaries. Still more, the expansion of intellect, the observation of nature, reflection, and philosophy inspired disbelief in the mythological legends and ideas. Greek skepticism spread through the Roman educated classes. Cultivated men wondered that soothsayers who chanced to meet, could look one another in the face without laughing. Roman officials whose office it was to superintend religious rites, in private treated them, and the imaginary divinities in whose honor they were solemnly practised, with derision. This disbelief among the educated often extended to the essential truths of natural religion, such as the existence of God and the future life. Where these truths were defended, writers, as in the case of Cicero, frequently made no reference to them in the exigencies where an earnest faith would have been likely to express itself.

The ancient philosophy may be contemplated from two points of view, either as comprising attempts to answer hard questions, to solve problems respecting the universe, man and his destiny, or as a means of practical guidance and solace.

Socrates was the founder of philosophy in its higher departments. With the exception of Pythagoras (580-500 B.C.), a mystic and ascetic, not without elevated ideas, the earlier speculation dealt exclusively with physics or natural philosophy. With Socrates (469-399 B.C.) the soul was the absorbing theme, virtue and moral improvement the prime objects of attention. He asserted theism, divine government and providence, the supreme obligation to obey conscience, the guilt and folly of unrighteousness. He believed, though not without a mixture of doubt, in personal immortality; but he shared in the common faith in a multiplicity of divinities, and laid too great stress on knowledge or intellectual insight as a necessary ingredient of virtue. By the earnestness and nobleness of his teaching, enforced by the serenity with which he endured death as a martyr, he exerted a powerful and lasting influence. The two main systems that sprang up on the basis of his doctrine were those of Plato (429-348 B.C.) and of Aristotle.

Diffusion of
skepticism.

The ancient
philosophy : its
founders.

control, looks with tranquillity on whatever may take place. In the later Stoics, the harsh features of the system were softened. The Stoic idea of a brotherhood of mankind is impressively set forth by Epictetus (c. 50–c. 120). Marcus Aurelius (121–180) stands on the same lofty plane; and in Seneca (c. 3 B.C.–65 A.D.), the tutor of Nero, the personality of God and the reality of a future life are distinctly recognized, while in various precepts this philosopher breathes a humane spirit akin to the gospel. The Stoic philosophy offered no satisfactory view of the universe and of its design. As a practical system, it lacked humility, and, in its unadulterated form, hardened the heart; but it had no small influence in diffusing abroad the idea of mankind as forming a single community. In its later influence, it mitigated the severity of Roman law. On the whole, the ancient philosophy did a work resembling in some degree that of the Old Testament law, in training the conscience. It kindled aspirations—for example, the yearning for a more intimate communion of mankind—which only the kingdom of God could meet. In this respect it was unconsciously prophetic. But philosophy, in the age when the gospel appeared, in the hands of the new Platonic school, had lapsed into pantheism. There was an eclectic tendency, a disposition to cull fragments of doctrine here and there, and to amalgamate systems with one another, just as there was a prevailing drift towards what is called *syncretism* in religion—the combination of elements drawn from the creeds and cults of different nations.

The state of morals in the Augustan age is depicted in as dark colors by Seneca as by Paul. Licentiousness and cruelty, the characteristic vices of ancient society, had been fostered by certain forms of heathen religion. The immoral tales of Greek mythology had been stigmatized as baneful to youth by Plato and Aristotle. By the downfall of liberty, and by intestine strife, Greek social life was demoralized. “The individual had begun to draw away more and more from the State,” and sunk morally to the position of “a man without a country.” Roman virtue gave way under the temptations to luxury and sensuality that followed upon the conquest of Greece and the plunder of the East. All ranks of Roman society were infected with the prevailing impurity. Immense sums were lavished upon luxurious banquets. Vices which may not even be named, were practised with impunity, and almost without reproach.’ The multitude of slaves furnished

boundless opportunities for sensual indulgence. Slaves, both in city and country, were often treated with extreme rigor. Infanticide was freely tolerated and practised. In the favorite Roman amusements, the stage, the circus, and the amphitheatre, the degradation of morals is most apparent. The stage became a school of vice and corruption. The taste for gladiatorial combats daily increased. In Rome and in other principal cities of the empire, multitudes of both sexes and of every age assembled to witness the bloody contests of men with wild beasts, and of human combatants with one another. The civil wars which, with occasional intervals, had raged from the conflict of Sulla and Marius to the triumph of Augustus had not only entailed unspeakable suffering upon the countries desolated by them, but had done much to break up habits of industry and morality. The picture of ancient society, even at that epoch, has a brighter as well as a darker side. On the whole, however, the state of things was far from being hopeful. No remedy could be discerned for the reigning evils. Consequently, not a few minds were afflicted with despondency. It is remarkable that in the wreck of traditional beliefs, and in the vague yearning for an anchor in the dark and troubled sea, many were inclined to turn their eyes to the East, the seat of ancient, mysterious religions, in the hope of finding there light and help. At this crisis in the world's history, the Saviour was born.

Philosophy, science, culture, in the broad sense of the term, are the gift of the Greeks to mankind; law and civil polity are a legacy from the Romans; but "salvation is of the Jews." They had been of old conscious of a spiritual eminence among the nations of the earth. "For what great nation is there that hath a god so nigh unto them as the Lord our God is whosoever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law?"¹ Nor had they lost the sense of a high spiritual office that belonged to them in relation to the rest of mankind. But their national independence was gone forever. They had been swallowed up in the wide-spread "monarchy of the Mediterranean." From the time of Hyrcanus II., the last of the Maccabean rulers, they had been subject to the Romans. By their will and consent, Herod, the son of Antipater, an Idumean proselyte, was made king. When Herod, an able ruler but a tyrant, died, his king-

The Jews.

63-40 B.C.

37-4 B.C.

¹ Deut. iv. 7, 8 (Revised Version).

dom was parcelled out among his three sons. Of these, after ten years, Archelaus tetrarch of Judea was dethroned, and banished to Vienne. Then Judea was annexed to the province of Syria, and ruled by procurators, one of whom was Pontius Pilate. Later, for a short time, the dominions of Herod were united under his grandson, Herod Agrippa I. At his death all Palestine was placed under procurators subordinate to the imperial governor of Syria.

Judea was the heart-stone of the whole Jewish race, and contained within it the sanctuary to which Jews resorted at the great religious festivals. Jews were found in large numbers in almost all parts of the empire. A multitude of exiles had planted themselves permanently in Babylonia, instead of returning to Jerusalem with the caravans that followed Ezra (457 B.C.) and Nehemiah (444 B.C.). In Alexandria and its neighborhood they numbered not less than a million. Under the Ptolemies the Old Testament had been rendered into Greek (c. 250 B.C.), and this version, called the Septuagint, was in general use among the Hellenists, or Jews of the Dispersion, beyond the limits of Palestine. In Antioch and in other places in Syria, in the numerous cities of Asia Minor, in Cyprus, Crete, and other islands of the Mediterranean, in the cities of Greece, in Illyricum, in Rome and in other towns of Italy, Jews had settled in large numbers. They followed the example of the Phoenicians: wherever there was a prospect of gain through trade and commerce, Jewish merchants swarmed.

Since the days of the Babylonian exile, when their political independence was extinguished, never to be regained except during the interval after the Maccabean revolt (142-61 B.C.), the Jews had clung to their faith and worship with an unyielding tenacity. The loss of political unity had the effect to tighten the bands of race and of religion. The period of the prophets—the ninth and eighth centuries B.C., when, in the conflict with idolatry, and in the trials and perils of foreign invasion, the faith of Israel had burst forth like a flame of fire—the period of Elijah and Elisha, of Hosea and Amos, of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, had gone by. From the time of Ezra and the rebuilding of the temple, the law with its strictly defined ritual was in full force, and the priesthood had supreme control. This is termed the period of the theocracy or hierocracy—the age of sacerdotal rule. Even the Samaritans, the worshippers on Mount Gerizim, although they accepted the Pentateuch, were yet, as being of a mixed race, considered aliens and heretics. The steadfast resist-

The Jewish
Dispersion.

Period of the
hierocracy.

ance to Gentile error and corruption was maintained by the Pharisees, who, with the Sadducees, formed the two principal parties.

The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes.

They were parties, and not sects in the modern sense. The Pharisees, the "Separated," were the representatives of the strictest orthodoxy. They clung not only to

the law, but also to the great body of traditional interpretation which had gathered about it. Mixed with their formalism was an intense, fanatical patriotism. They naturally tended to casuistry and quibbling, which gave rise to hypocrisy, and too often connected itself with a spirit of selfish greed and with joy in the reputation of sanctity. The Sadducees, so named from Zadok, a high-priest in the time of David, were composed mainly of the priestly nobility. The high sacerdotal offices were generally in their hands. They were not so hostile to foreigners and foreign influence. They ascribed normal authority to the law of the Pentateuch alone. They were infected with a rationalistic spirit, had no sympathy with the prevalent Messianic hopes, and disbelieved in the doctrine of the resurrection. Both parties were represented in the Sanhedrim, the great court or council, invested with judicial functions, having its seat at Jerusalem. In connection with the Pharisees stood the Scribes, the teachers and copyists of the sacred books. A third party, which may properly be called a sect, were the Essenes, numbering a few thousands. They dwelt chiefly in village communities, eastward of Jerusalem, towards the Dead Sea. Their strict organization, their mingling of manual labor with exercises of devotion, their renunciation of marriage and of property apart from the common stock, their methodical discipline with its fixed round of employments, gave them a resemblance to monastic societies or brotherhoods of a later date. The abjuring of sacrifices, and the invocation, in some obscure way, of the sun, were among

Alexandrian Judaism.

their principal differences from orthodox Judaism. Outside of Palestine, at Alexandria, arose a peculiar type of Jewish theology, in which the Platonic philosophy was curiously blended with Old Testament teaching. This was accomplished through the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. At Alexandria the books which we call apocryphal were taken up into the Old Testament canon. One of them, The Wisdom of Solomon, was

Philo.

written to commend the Alexandrian theology to the Jews of Palestine. The principal expounder of the Alexandrian Jewish philosophy was Philo, who was born about 20 B.C.

The centres of Jewish instruction and worship were the synagogues, which sprung up during and after the Exile. They were

found not only in Palestine, but also in all the towns of the Roman Empire of any considerable size, where Jews resided. The buildings were plain, rectangular edifices, either placed on an eminence or marked by a pole rising from the roof. The synagogues were under the management of "elders." In them, on the Sabbath, all faithful Jews met for prayer, and to hear and to study the law.

Although the Jews were hated for their exclusiveness, their zeal in making proselytes to their religion was attended, as the heathen writers attest, with great success. The proselytes were of two classes—"proselytes of righteousness," who were circumcised and acquired all, or nearly all, the privileges of a born Israelite, and "proselytes of the gate." These last were admitted to certain privileges on the condition of obeying what were called the seven Noachian precepts, which comprised the prohibition of uncleanness, of idolatry, and of the eating of "flesh with the blood thereof."

In this way monotheistic faith and worship had been planted in the Roman provinces and beyond their borders. Along with their immovable faith and their intense devotion to the law, the Jews in general looked for the coming of the day when the relation of ruler and subject would be reversed. They longed for the hour when they would be delivered from the galling yoke of foreign rule, and when dominion would be transferred to Jehovah's chosen people. The current interpretations of prophecy varied in form, and were more or less spiritual in their tenor. But the prevalent hope was of a political Messiah, who would throw off the hateful Roman domination, and give victory, and with it rest and comfort, to Israel. His throne was to be erected at Jerusalem. To the temple on Mount Zion all nations were to bring their gifts and oblations.